

What Makes People

LAUGH?



When a stage "boob" gets familiar with a society dowager—on the stage, of course—the audience always roars

By Carol Bird

WHAT are some of the things that "hand people a laugh" today? The "wisecrack"? The ridiculous quip? The risqué gag? The humorous situation? On the other hand, is it possible that folks have turned laugh-proof in a wholly muddled world?

The question was put to Jimmy Durante, comedian, the funny man with the big nose that has helped to make him famous.

"People are more anxious to laugh than they've ever been before, bless their hearts," said Durante. "Goodness knows, they need some laughs! However, just because they are eager to have their risibilities tickled doesn't mean that they've grown less critical than heretofore. A comedian has to have the right material or he won't make 'em loosen up and show that they're amused. I don't think the writers who furnish comedians with material have ever received the proper credit. After all, a comedian is no funnier than his stuff. If his lines and business aren't clever, he just won't get the laughs."

"A good gag? Yes, it will get a laugh, but to use it is like building a house of cards. As soon as you've used that gag, plo! it's over, like a card house that has toppled. You've got to come quick with another. It's like keeping a chain letter going."

"And a gag puts an audience on the qui vive. They expect rapid-fire funny stuff from then on. It is like serving an appetizer. It just tends to make the guests hungrier for more food. But the situation-gag is different. That is more satisfying. It lasts a bit longer and isn't forgotten so easily, either. Comparing a gag and a situation-gag is like putting a canape beside a steak. The second is good, solid food."

"Give you an example? Right. Here's one I had in a picture not so very long ago. I played the part of a man who was a pal to another carnival fellow. This chap had a new baby, but they wouldn't give it to him at the hospital because he was in the carnival business and they didn't think him a proper parent to raise the kid. The baby was born in the hospital and Tracy, the carnival man, and I, his friend, sneak into the place one night to steal the kid."

"The scene cuts away from us and shows a nurse making a date with a doctor on the staff. He says: 'Meet me in five minutes in such-and-such a room and we'll arrange a time of meeting when we're off duty,' or something to that effect. Meanwhile, Tracy has arrived at the hospital to steal the baby. He stations me right inside the room to stand guard and warn him of the arrival of any one as he takes the baby out of the crib. The room is dimly lighted. The nurse, in love with the doctor, comes into the room, mistakes me, in the dim light, for her sweetheart, flings her arms around my neck and kisses me again and again with great fervor."

"I manage to disentangle myself from her entwining arms, pull myself up indignantly and ask: 'Say, what kind of a joint is this?' That situation got the biggest laugh of any in the picture."

DURANTE then recalled another humorous situation in a legitimate show which "brought down the house." "I come on the stage, in one scene, and announce that Al Jolson is ill and I'm to take his place. Then I go into the number. I get down on one knee

LAUGHS!

From Jimmy Durante

A UNHAPPY husband says, woefully, while complaining of his wife's treatment of him, "She wants me to play second fiddle." His mother-in-law, overhearing the remark, says contemptuously: "Humph! Second fiddle, indeed! I wouldn't let you play in the orchestra at all."

A MAN in a silk hat climbs out of a town car of a well-known and cheap make. He is going to enter a building, but before he does so he carefully places a blanket over the hood. A roughneck kid standing at the curb cries out, derisively: "Mister, you don't have to hide it! I saw what it was!"

A MAN goes limping along the street. He meets a friend. The friend asks him the trouble. "My shoes are too sizes too small," he replies. "Well, why in blazes don't you buy shoes that fit you?" The first man groans angrily. "I've lost my money. My wife has left me. My sons have lost their jobs. The only pleasure I get out of life these days is when I get home and take off these shoes."



One of the biggest laughs Durante evoked from an audience was when he carried a small house onto a stage that had been piled high with wood of all descriptions and in all forms

and sing his 'Mammy' song. There is thunderous applause. A voice which is supposed to belong to a well-known theatrical producer is overheard backstage saying: 'Bend both knees, Jimmy, and the job is yours for good.' That was a bit of good-natured kidding of a popular comedian, and Broadway, knowing all his numbers and his way of rendering them, couldn't help but laugh."

"There are, by the way, two distinct brands of humor: the kind that Broadway laughs at and the kind that goes over on the road. Broadway audiences constitute a sort of fraternity of their own. Years ago, for example, I sang a



The world is laughing again, says Jimmy Durante, stage, radio and screen comedian, but only clean jokes go over. Audiences are not interested in salaciousness, nor in jokes that point to the infirmities of others, he says

song, 'I know darn well I can do it on Broadway, but can Broadway do it on me?' That got the laughs in New York, but I don't know whether it would have gone over so big elsewhere."

All comedians are said to be psychologists. Durante proved this theory by his next observation:

"I think that the comedian who is

amused them, but they want him to get the best of the situation, too. They're on his side of the fence."

"That's why people laugh at the comedian who plays the role of an unhappy husband and says woefully in one stage scene, while complaining of his wife's treatment of him: 'She wants me to play second fiddle,' and his mother-in-law, overhearing the remark, snorts contemptuously and says: 'Humph! Second fiddle, indeed! I wouldn't let you play in the orchestra at all!'"

"People are also amused by the downfall of the haughty. Just put a silk hat on a man and let him act pompous, and then have him slip on a banana peel, or have something drop on his silk hat and crush it and you'll hear the audience howl with glee. It's the old idea of 'Pride cometh before a fall,' and everybody likes the idea of this sequence of events."

"TAKE, for example, the stage spectacle of a haughty society woman. She is very snobbish and looks disdainfully and with a feeling of superiority upon her fellow human beings. She uses a lorgnette, and her gaze is cold and haughty. In walks the comedian. His clothes are baggy. He is unkempt. He is a 'boob.' He's such a boob, in fact, that he doesn't recognize this lady as his superior. He feels sociable and friendly. He approaches the queenly lady in her immaculate attire and whacks her chummily on the back. He grasps her hand and pumps it up and down in chummy fashion. He gazes with puzzlement at her lorgnette and asks her what it is."

"All of this business makes an audience roar with delight. It is just too funny, this spectacle of contrasts, the idea of a hobo sort of fellow getting familiar with an iceberg lady."

The "beauty and the beast" motif is also a laugh-getter, according to Durante, who explains it thus:

"Just give an audience a scene wherein a lovely looking girl is courted by the homely comedian. Most comedians are supposed to be ugly looking, you know, at any rate not handsome 'hero' types. Have the comedian so insulated by unawareness of his own shortcomings when it comes to looks that he will court this

young beauty with no thought that she might turn him down. This situation occurred in a recent show in which I appeared. I had a scene with Hope Williams, in which I sing to her, 'Let's Call It a Day.' I warble on and on, with lovesick manner. 'Come, let's run away, fly with me.' The very suggestion that this charming lady might favor me with even so much as a pleasant look is laughable. And so people laugh!"

"It is the consummate ego of a funny-looking fellow who doesn't seem to realize he's a joke that amuses people. The combination of humor and pathos in the poor boob's make-up. For example, I remember one scene in a show where a guy suddenly, without provocation, walks up to me and pokes me in the nose. I look at him in hurt surprise and ask: 'Why did you do that? Is it because I have curly hair? Because my teeth are pearly? Is that why you socked me?'"

"The audience laughs. The comedian is quite the opposite, of course. His hair is straight, his teeth are NOT pearly. His blind vanity sets the audience off into peals of laughter."

IT IS Jimmy Durante's opinion that the risqué comedy material is dynamic, unless it is very subtle and put over in extremely delicate fashion.

"I think the cleaner the comedian is the more chance he has for getting over," said Durante. "Smut will surely drown him in the end. It all depends, of course, on how adroitly the material or situation is brought in or built up. I appeared in a number called 'Wood' some time ago, and one little occurrence in that brought down the house. In fact, it got a one-minute-and-a-half laugh."

"This sketch was one showing the uses to which wood can be put. It was a mixture of ridiculous situations. The stage, first of all, was piled with wood. Wood. Wood. Wood of every imaginable kind, from stacks of toothpicks to huge pieces of lumber. We

Jimmy Durante, Famous Comedian of Stage and Screen, Here Tells You What Gets the Most Guffaws—Fun Must Be Clean, He Declares



carry in more and more wood, of every shape and variety. Then very seriously we carry in a little wooden house, the kind made famous in that masterpiece, 'The Specialist.' There was no sign, no word, nothing on the little house, and we didn't even refer to it. It was just there. But, somehow, the mere sight of it made people laugh. There really wasn't any vulgarity about the way the scene was handled."

Durante again spoke of the scenes wherein dignified people are pulled down from a high place and why they get the laughs.

"People like to see 'high-hatters' razed a bit," he said. And he paid a tribute here to the "red-headed brother" of the Marx Brothers, comedians. "He got plenty of laughs in a scene he had with some haughty society girls. He comes in and breezily holds converse with them, while all the time tin spoons are dropping out of his pockets, with a clatter, to the floor."

"Every one likes to see a 'snooty guy' made to look like a sap. There is the funny scene in one show where a man in a silk hat climbs out of a town car of a well-known and cheap make. He is going to enter a building, and before he does so he carefully places a blanket over the hood. It is a cold day and, of course, he doesn't want the engine to freeze. But the tender, careful gesture reminds one of a mother covering up her baby or of some one concealing something of which he is ashamed. A roughneck kid standing at the curb makes this clear by a cute gag line. He cries out derisively, in his high-pitched little voice:

"Mister, you don't have to hide it! I saw what it was!"

The cruel quip, the joke which pokes fun at any one's infirmities, whether it be at stuttering, palsy, deafness, lameness or so on, just isn't funny, according to Durante, and if a comedian wants to be successful he must not include such material in his repertoire.

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